Introduction to Species Summary

Within the report area you have requested, separate summaries are provided for documented, potential, and invasive species. Each of these summaries provides the following information when present for a species: (1) the number of observations and species occurrences documented; (2) the geographic range polygons that the project overlaps; (3) predicted relative habitat suitability classes that are present if a predicted distribution model has been created; (4) ecological systems present with which the species is commonly or occasionally associated. Lists identify whether species are classified as: Species of Concern, Special Status Species, Important Animal Habitats, Potential Species of Concern, Under Review plants, other native species, Noxious Weeds, Aquatic Invasive Species, or other introduced species. Details on each of these information categories are included under relevant section headers below or are defined on our Species Status Codes web page. In presenting this information, the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP) is working towards assisting the user with rapidly determining what native and introduced species have been documented and what species are potentially present in a report area. We remind users that this information is likely incomplete as surveys to document native and introduced species are lacking in many areas of the state, information on introduced species has only been tracked relatively recently, the MTNHP's staff and resources are restricted by declining budgets, and information is constantly being added and updated in our databases. **Thus, field verification by professional biologists of the absence or presence of species and biological communities will always be an important obligation of users of our data.**

If you are aware of observation datasets that the MTNHP is missing, please report them to the Program Botanist apipp@mt.gov or Senior Zoologist dbachen@mt.gov. If you have observations that you would like to contribute, you can submit animal observations using our online data entry system at http://mtnhp.org/AddObs/, plant and animal observations via Excel spreadsheets posted at http://mtnhp.org/observations.asp , or to the Program Botanist or Senior Zoologist.

Observations

The MTNHP manages information on more than 1.8 million animal and plant observations that have been reported by professional biologists and private citizens from across Montana. The majority of these observations are submitted in digital format from standardized databases associated with research or monitoring efforts and spreadsheets of incidental observations submitted by professional biologists and amateur naturalists. At a minimum, accepted observation records must contain a credible species identification (i.e. appropriate geographic range, date, and habitat and, if species are difficult to identify, a photograph and notes on key identifying features), a date or date range, observer name, locational information (ideally with latitude and longitude information in decimal degrees), notes on numbers observed, and species behavior or habitat use (e.g., is the observation likely associated with reproduction). Bird records are also required to have information associated with the breeding or overwintering status of the species observed. MTNHP reviews observation records to ensure that they are mapped correctly, occur within date ranges when the species is known to be present or detectable, occur within the known seasonal geographic range of the species, and occur in appropriate habitats. MTNHP also assigns each record a locational uncertainty value in meters to indicate the spatial precision associated with the record's mapped coordinates. Only records with locational uncertainty values of 10,000 meters or less are included in environmental summary reports and number summaries are only provided for records with locational uncertainty values of 1,000 meters or less.

Species Occurrences

The MTNHP evaluates plant and animal observation records for species of higher conservation concern to determine whether they are worthy of inclusion in the Species Occurrence (SO) layer for use in environmental reviews; observations not worthy of inclusion in this layer include long distance dispersal events, migrants observed away from key migratory stopover habitats, and winter observations. An SO is a polygon depicting what is known about a species occupancy from direct observation with a defined level of locational uncertainty and any inference that can be made about adjacent habitat use from the latest peer-reviewed science. If an observation can be associated with a map feature that can be tracked (e.g., a wetland boundary for a wetland

associated plant) then this polygon feature is used to represent the SO. Areas that can be inferred as probable occupied habitat based on direct observation of a species location and what is known about the foraging area or home range size of the species may be incorporated into the SO. Species Occurrences generally belong to one of the following categories:

Plant Species Occurrences

A documented location of a specimen collection or observed plant population. In some instances, adjacent, spatially separated clusters are considered subpopulations and are grouped as one occurrence (e.g., the subpopulations occur in ecologically similar habitats, and their spatial proximity likely allows them to interbreed). Tabular information for multiple observations at the same SO location is generally linked to a single polygon. Plant SO's are only created for Species of Concern and Potential Species of Concern.

Animal Species Occurrences

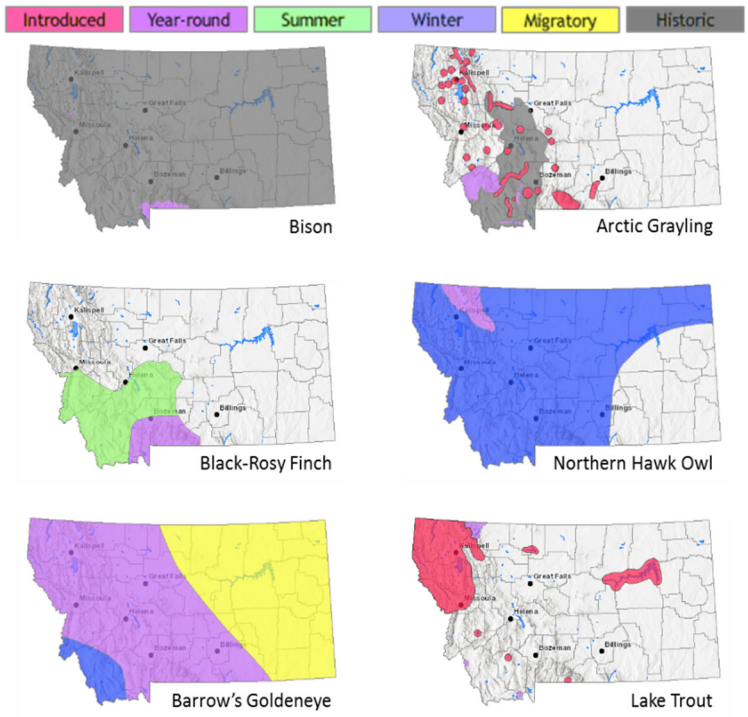
The location of a verified observation or specimen record typically known or assumed to represent a breeding population or a portion of a breeding population. Animal SO's are generally: (1) buffers of terrestrial point observations based on documented species' home range sizes; (2) buffers of stream segments to encompass occupied streams and immediate adjacent riparian habitats; (3) polygonal features encompassing known or likely breeding populations (e.g., a wetland for some amphibians or a forested portion of a mountain range for some wide ranging carnivores); or (4) combinations of the above. Tabular information for multiple observations at the same SO location is generally linked to a single polygon. Species Occurrence polygons may encompass some unsuitable habitat in some instances in order to avoid heavy data processing associated with clipping out habitats that are readily assessed as unsuitable by the data user (e.g., a point buffer of a terrestrial species may overlap into a portion of a lake that is obviously inappropriate habitat for the species). Animal SO's are only created for Species of Concern and Special Status Species (e.g., Bald Eagle).

Other Occurrence Polygons

These include significant biological features not included in the above categories, such as Important Animal Habitats like bird rookeries and bat roosts, and peatlands or other wetland and riparian communities that support diverse plant and animal communities.

Geographic Range Polygons

Geographic range polygons have not yet been defined for most plant species. Introduced, year-round, summer, winter, migratory, and historic geographic range polygons have been defined for most animal species for which there are enough observations, surveys, and knowledge of appropriate seasonal habitat use to define them (see examples to right). These native or introduced range polygons bound the extent of known or likely occupied habitats for non-migratory and relative sedentary species and the regular extent of known or likely occupied habitats for migratory and long-distance dispersing species; polygons may include unsuitable intervening habitats. For most species, a single polygon can represent the year-round or seasonal range, but breeding ranges of some colonial nesting water birds and some introduced species are represented more patchily when supported by data. Some ranges are mapped more broadly than actual distributions in order to be visible on statewide maps (e.g., fish).



Predictive Distribution Models

Recent predictive distribution models have not yet been created for most plant species. For animal species for which models have been completed, the environmental summary report includes simple, rule-based, associations with streams for fish and other aquatic species and mathematically complex Maximum Entropy models (Phillips et al. 2006, Ecological Modeling 190:231-259) constructed from a variety of statewide biotic and abiotic layers and presence only data for individual species contributed to Montana Natural Heritage Program databases for most terrestrial species. For the Maximum Entropy models, we reclassified 90 x 90-meter continuous model output into suitability classes (unsuitable, low, moderate, and high) then aggregated that into the one square mile hexagons used in the environmental summary report; this is the finest spatial scale we suggest using this information for management decisions and survey planning. Full model write ups for individual species that discuss model goals, inputs, outputs, and evaluation in much greater detail are posted on the MTNHP's Predicted Suitable Habitat Models for Selected Montana Plant and Animal Species page. Evaluations of predictive accuracy and specific limitations are included with the metadata for models of individual species. **Model outputs should not be used in place of on-the-ground surveys for species. Instead model outputs should be used in conjunction with habitat evaluations to determine the need for on-the-ground surveys for species.**

Associated Habitats

We associated the use (common or occasional) of each of the 82 ecological systems mapped in Montana for vertebrate animal species that regularly breed, overwinter, or migrate through the state by: (1) using personal observations and reviewing literature that summarize the breeding, overwintering, or migratory habitat requirements of each species; (2) evaluating structural characteristics and distribution of each ecological system relative to the species' range and habitat requirements; (3) examining the observation records for each species in the state-wide point observation database associated with each ecological system; and (4) calculating the percentage of observations associated with each ecological system relative to the percent of Montana covered by each ecological system to get a measure of "observations versus availability of habitat". Species that breed in Montana were only evaluated for breeding habitat use, species that only overwinter in Montana were only evaluated for overwintering habitat use, and species that only migrate through Montana were only evaluated for migratory habitat use. In general, species were listed as associated with an ecological system if structural characteristics of used habitat documented in the literature were present in the ecological system or large numbers of point observations were associated with the ecological system. However, species were not listed as associated with an ecological system if there was no support in the literature for use of structural characteristics in an ecological system, even if point observations were associated with that system. Common versus occasional association with an ecological system was assigned based on the degree to which the structural characteristics of an ecological system matched the preferred structural habitat characteristics for each species as represented in scientific literature. The percentage of observations associated with each ecological system relative to the percent of Montana covered by each ecological system was also used to guide assignment of common versus occasional association.

We suggest that species associations with ecological systems be used in conjunction with geographic range polygons and predictive distribution models to generate potential lists of species that may occupy broader landscapes for the purposes of landscape-level planning. Users of this information should be aware that land cover mapping accuracy is particularly problematic when the systems occur as small patches or where the land cover types have been altered over the past decade. Thus, particular caution should be used when using the associations in assessments of smaller areas (e.g., evaluations of public land survey sections).